

# THE NEW AMERICAN SUCCESS ACT OF 2015



## Introduction

Recognizing a growing need for a holistic federal policy to facilitate the entrance of today's immigrants into the mainstream, the president signed the "Presidential Memorandum on Creating Welcoming Communities and Fully Integrating Immigrants and Refugees" as part of his November 2014 immigration actions. This memorandum created the White House Task Force on New Americans to examine civic, linguistic, and economic integration at the federal, state, and local levels of government. However, without legislation authorizing a permanent and robust policy solution, the task force's enduring influence will remain limited in scope.

The task force's recent report underscored the magnitude of the issue at hand: there are roughly 8.8 million lawful permanent residents eligible to naturalize but who have not taken this final step in the integration process largely due to financial and linguistic reasons. However, a 2012 Pew Hispanic survey found that 96% of participating

green card holders would naturalize if possible.<sup>1</sup> A 2014 Latino Decisions poll suggests Latino immigrants are actively taking steps to integrate: 62% have taken an English class and 46% have taken an American government or history course.<sup>2</sup> These numbers make clear today's immigrants are no less willing than those who came before them to embrace American life, but are met with greater challenges due to an underfunded patchwork of services at the federal, state, and local levels. As a result, millions of immigrants cannot access support that would facilitate their successful integration, undermining the nation's ability to harness the contributions of this growing and dynamic population.

The National Council of La Raza (NCLR) has a robust history of advocacy related to immigrant integration. Informed by an Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organizations, NCLR's work has ranged from incorporating immigrants into the financial mainstream to providing access to quality health care and

---

This analysis was written by Victoria Benner, Senior Legislative Analyst in NCLR's Office of Research, Advocacy, and Legislation. Samantha Vargas Poppe, Associate Director of the Policy Analysis Center and Charles Kamasaki, Senior Advisor to the Cabinet provided editorial input. Amelia Collins, Associate Policy Analyst, assisted with research. Karen Nava, Director of Graphics and Publications, designed the document and John Marth, Quality Control Editor, edited and prepared this document for publication.

reducing barriers to naturalization.<sup>3</sup> This brief will build on this work to examine recent legislative proposals to create a federal immigrant integration policy, focusing specifically on the “New American Success Act of 2015,” sponsored by Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) and Representative Tony Cardenas (D-CA).

## Legislative Analysis

Building on the president’s actions aimed at addressing immigrant integration, Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Representative Tony Cardenas reintroduced their “New American Success Act of 2015” in July 2015. The intent of the “New American Success Act of 2015” is clear. More than determining the substance or details of integration policy, it would put in place a framework for all levels of government, along with community-based organizations and businesses, to bring the three pillars of integration—civic, linguistic, and economic—together. To achieve this, the bill would primarily allow the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) to solicit and accept private donations to fund two grant programs:<sup>\*</sup>

- **Initial Entry, Adjustment, and Citizenship Assistance Grants:** The Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security may award competitive grants to local governments or community-based

organizations to provide immigrants with legal assistance to adjust or change their status.

- **Integration Success Grants:** The Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security may award competitive grants to states or local governments to develop and implement a comprehensive plan addressing immigrant integration.

This bill is a critical acknowledgment that the public and private sectors should do more to align civic, linguistic, and economic integration. It also recognizes the need to add new and align existing resources to promote immigrant integration. Notwithstanding the major benefits, there are several ways in which the bill could be improved to provide the comprehensive fixes required to achieve its goals.

## Omission of a National Office

The “New American Success Act of 2015” does not establish any permanent structure within the federal government to coordinate initiatives across agencies related to civic, linguistic, and economic integration. In the absence of such a coordinating entity, such as an office, with a constant presence and clear mission, there is a risk of maintaining the status quo of federal programs operating in distinct silos without a coherent strategy. A permanent

<sup>\*</sup> The legislation also has other provisions, including one that would waive the English proficiency requirement for elderly immigrants naturalizing. However, this provision is unrelated to the analysis and recommendations.

<sup>†</sup> As the findings of the “New American Success Act of 2015” state, a century ago, during the last great wave of immigration to this country, the public and private sectors promoted the integration of newcomers through the settlement house movement, the founding of the modern public library system, the establishment of universal public education.

office with a strong mandate to implement the legislation's Integration Success Grants and overall purpose is, therefore, critical. Along with a focus on aligning civic obligation to higher levels of educational attainment and workforce development, such an office could, for the first time in a century, promote an overarching immigrant integration policy.<sup>†</sup> It could advise other federal entities about how the United States can best serve its newest arrivals and put them on a path to becoming successful Americans. Additionally, such an office could hold national, state, and local levels accountable by establishing meaningful goals, indicators, and metrics. A central coordinating body of this kind is therefore fundamental to the rest of the legislation achieving its objectives.

Furthermore, it is important the coordinating mechanism is established in the White House and not in the Department of Homeland Security as some proposals have suggested.\* While many have raised concerns about expansions of executive authority, a division of DHS will not have the ability or authority to align programs from the Department of Labor, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Education, and beyond. Only an office within the White House can effectively perform this role.

**Recommendation:** The “New American Success Act of 2015” should establish a national office within the White House.<sup>†</sup>

\* For example, the “Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act” (S. 744) from the 113th Congress would have established an Office of New Americans within the Department of Homeland Security.

† The “New American Success Act of 2014” (H.R. 4949) from the 113th Congress would have authorized an “Office of New Americans.”

## Structure of Grants

Both grant programs authorized by the “New American Success Act of 2015” have elements in their structure that will impact their overall functionality.

- **Initial Entry, Adjustment, and Citizenship Assistance Grants:** There is evidence that many immigrants need additional legal support to successfully integrate into American society.<sup>4</sup> Initial Entry, Adjustment, and Citizenship Assistance Grants wisely support capacity-building in this area. However, funded entities would not be required to have a formal accreditation or certification to provide immigration services, and local governments and nonprofits are both eligible for awards on their own. Altering this language could incentivize more organizations to invest in building their capacity and professionalizing their immigration service, along with ensuring the federal government was funding only qualified providers. It also would encourage municipalities and the nonprofit sector to coordinate service at the local level.

**Recommendation:** Require proof of formal certification or accreditation for direct service and partnerships between local governments and the nonprofit sector for funding.

- **Integration Success Grants:** The current

proposal identifies the Department of Homeland Security as the sole arbiter of funding. If the premise of the bill and these grants is to incentivize cross-agency collaboration to address civic, linguistic, and economic integration jointly, authorizing exclusive grant-making authority within the Department of Homeland Security is unlikely to achieve this end. Awards should be granted on a collaborative basis with other agencies with expertise beyond immigration casework, including but not limited to the Departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services. Furthermore, unless this change occurs, the Integration Success Grant will operationally act as a duplicative version of existing Citizenship and Integration Grants.

**Recommendation:** The Departments of Homeland Security, Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services should jointly administer the Integration Success Grants, perhaps coordinated through a central mechanism.

### Inadequate Funding Mechanism

The proposal in the “New American Success Act of 2015” to allow USCIS to solicit and accept private donations as a sole means of funding the authorized grants is not likely to provide the scope of appropriations required. Understanding

the limitations created by the House of Representatives’ rules requiring funding offsets, for the Integration Success Grants to truly operate at their full potential, a dedicated and ongoing investment is more appropriate than what could be provided by the business and philanthropic sectors alone. Business and philanthropy certainly have a role to play in immigrant integration, but it is far from clear these interests would choose to fund the federal government over others in the nonprofit community, or even that they should.

**Recommendation:** Identify additional dedicated sources of funding beyond private donations.

### No Inclusion of Health Care

While this legislation creates a broad structure and is not intended to prescribe policy details, it is nonetheless notable that there is no reference to health care in the bill. For a variety of reasons, many immigrants are not eligible for coverage under the Affordable Care Act, Medicaid, or Medicare.\* While health is not traditionally part of the immigrant integration field, lack of coverage has the potential to undermine the core goals of civic, linguistic, and economic integration. Adults without insurance who are facing rising medical costs may be less likely to succeed in the workplace. Research shows children with untreated medical conditions are less

\* Lawful permanent residents are subject to five-year bars to accessing Medicaid and Medicare. The Affordable Care Act also restricts eligibility for certain immigrants. Additional details are available from the National Immigration Law Center on the Affordable Care Act, <https://www.nilc.org/ACAfacts.html> and other means-tested benefits, <https://www.nilc.org/access-to-bens.html>.

likely to achieve in school. Beyond issues of insurance, the provision of in-language services is critical to ensuring recent immigrants understand medical advice for themselves and their children while still adjusting to life in this country.

**Recommendation:** Health coverage should be added to the “New American Success Act of 2015.”

## Conclusion

Often overlooked in the broader immigration reform movement, civic, linguistic, and economic integration are vital to prepare immigrants for success in American life. It is clear the “New American Success Act of 2015” is an important piece of an emerging conversation on this subject. The legislation makes explicit that integration ought to be a priority, not relegated to an afterthought of the adult education, workforce development, or related policy fields. Moreover, the legislation is a crucial acknowledgment that strong federal leadership is required to fully address integration challenges.

To this end, the goal of the “New American Success Act of 2015” is to put in a place a federal structure to enable the development and implementation of a cohesive federal immigrant integration strategy. At its core, it is a bill about governance and creating systems more than it is about the substance of what immigrant integration entails. While this bill is not a substitute for comprehensive reform of the immigration system, it deserves serious attention as a framework for future policy formation. However, as

currently written, there are elements of this legislation that would undermine its effectiveness if enacted. There are ways to improve the bill as this analysis has suggested. Perhaps the simplest solution, although hardly complete, is embodied in the “New American Success Act of 2014” (H.R. 4949). This would restore a national office and resolve issues relating to the grant structure.

While it seems unlikely Congress will act on this legislation in the near future, a strengthened “New American Success Act” could be reintroduced at a time when its prospects are improved. It is also possible this act could be incorporated, if amended, into a future comprehensive immigration reform bill. Such a pairing would be appropriate since comprehensive reform legislation would raise billions of dollars, providing an ample source of funding for the programs authorized by a “New American Success Act.”

Regardless of the process required to move a “New American Success Act” forward, it is clear the federal government needs to adopt a comprehensive policy to address civic, linguistic, and economic integration. Questions of immigration status and numbers of those entering the United States will always be controversial; it remains in the national interest to ensure those already here have the resources that benefited previous generations to become new Americans. Although not without shortcomings, the “New American Success Act of 2015” is a useful step in advancing the conversation on this often-ignored subject.



## Endnotes

- 1 Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, Mark Hugo Lopez, Jeffrey Passel and Paul Taylor, *The Path Not Taken: Two-thirds of Legal Mexican Immigrants are not U.S. Citizens* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2013), [http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2013/02/Naturalizations\\_Jan\\_2013\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2013/02/Naturalizations_Jan_2013_FINAL.pdf) (accessed August 2015).
- 2 Sylvia Manzano, “Barriers and Strategies to Naturalization for Latino Legal Permanent Residents” (Washington, DC: Latino Decisions, 2014), <http://www.latinodecisions.com/blog/2014/04/14/barriers-and-strategies-to-naturalization-for-latino-legal-permanent-residents/> (accessed August 2015).
- 3 Janis Bowdler, Lindsay Daniels, and Marisabel Torres, *Affording Citizenship and Securing a Sound Financial Future* (Washington, DC: NCLR, 2012), [http://www.nclr.org/images/uploads/publications/citizenship\\_financial\\_barriers\\_92812.pdf](http://www.nclr.org/images/uploads/publications/citizenship_financial_barriers_92812.pdf) (accessed August 2015); Ricardo Ramirez and Olga Medina, *Catalysts and Barriers to Attaining Citizenship: An Analysis of ya es hora ¡CIUDADANIA!* (Washington, DC: NCLR, 2010), [http://www.nclr.org/index.php/publications/catalysts\\_and\\_barriers\\_to\\_attaining\\_citizenship\\_an\\_analysis\\_of\\_ya\\_es\\_hora\\_ciudadania/](http://www.nclr.org/index.php/publications/catalysts_and_barriers_to_attaining_citizenship_an_analysis_of_ya_es_hora_ciudadania/) (accessed August 2015); Olga Medina and Marisabel Torres, *Citizenship Beyond Reach* (Washington, DC: NCLR, 2009), [http://www.nclr.org/index.php/publications/citizenship\\_beyond\\_reach/](http://www.nclr.org/index.php/publications/citizenship_beyond_reach/) (accessed August 2015).
- 4 Charles Kamasaki, Susan Timmons, and Courtney Tudi, “Immigration Reform and Administrative Relief: A Report on Behalf of the Committee for Immigration Reform Implementation (CIRI), Human Resources Working Group,” *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 3, no. 3 (2015): 283-305, <http://jmhs.cmsny.org/index.php/jmhs/article/view/53> (accessed August 2015).